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ABSTRACT

Many aspects of the work environment can lead to feelings of stress among teachers. The job, other teachers, discipline issues, and characteristics of the school administration can all be potential stressors for teachers. Understanding the dynamics of teacher stress can be useful for school administrators in many ways. It provides them with a better understanding of their own and teachers' work lives; it can make them better supervisors and colleagues for teachers; it can also improve the effectiveness of the school. Administrators should know what causes teacher stress and how to reduce the stress; at the very least, they should understand why teachers react to the school environment. If each school administrator identified those aspects of managerial style and school environment that are stress-producing and tried to alter these phenomena, stress reduction for teachers would be possible. Some ways of alleviating teacher stress are by providing: (1) role clarity; (2) equitable workload distribution; (3) accurate matching of skills to assignments; and (4) inservice education for needed skills. (JD)

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Stress has become a popular topic of discussion recently. Many news stories have reported the severity of stress experienced by various kinds of workers. Many of the Air Traffic Controllers' demands in the current strike focus on issues of work-related stress. There is no doubt that stress is a significant aspect of many people's work lives, and that it can take a severe toll on the pople who experience it.

One group of workers generally acknowledged as being under a great deal of stress is public school teachers. Many teachers, particularly those teaching in inner city schools, have argued that they should be given 'combat pay' for doing the work they are doing. In this paper, the nature of stress is defined, the reasons why teachers experience stress are discussed, and suggestions offered about what school administrators can do to reduce teacher stress.

The Nature of Stress

Stress has almost as many definitions as it has discussants. Hans Selye, a leading authority on issues of stress, defined the phenomenon as the "nonspecific response of the body to any demand." This definition is too vague to be useful for most practical purposes. The focus of this paper is on those responses of teachers that are stimulated, or at least aggravated, by their school experiences. Thus, stress can be defined as the present context as "the potentially dysfunctional responses of the individual (i.e., the teacher) to the demands of the work place (i.e., the school)."

Generally, discussions of the stress phenomenon emphasize its negative consequences. For example, stress has been linked to the probability of getting heart attacks, ulcers, hypertension, etc. Stress has also been found to increase the likelihood of drug use, alcoholism, reduced output, and so forth. But it should be remembered that stress can also be functional: many of us work more effectively under pressure, and athletes usually perform better during competition than in training. Both these are instances in which the human body uses moderate amounts of stress to improve its performance. In small amounts and over short periods of time, then, stress can be useful. In large doses and/or over extended periods, however, stress can be quite harmful.

The Causes of Stress

Stress can come from many sources. A single culprit cannot be pinpointed as the unique cause of stress in all cases. Factors that cause stress are generally termed *stressors*, and can be classified under three broad headings:

- Environmental stresssors stem from conditions outside the work place, and include clients, auditors, parents, the community at large, etc.
- Organizational stressors stem from conditions at the work place, i.e., the school, and include characteristics of supervisors, jobs, etc.
- Individual stressors stem from characteristics of the person experiencing the stress, and include family responsibility, personality, age, etc.

Since the focus of this paper is the *school-related* sources of stress, only organizational stressors will be discussed at length here. It should be kept in mind, however, that some stress that teachers experience may be stimulated by non-school-related factors.

Organizational stressors arise from conditions at the work place. Characteristics of the job, relationships with others, and general properties of the school can all be sources of stress at some point in time or another. Data from a study conducted by the author are cited in the following elaboration of organizational stressors. These data are used for illustrative purposes, as appropriate.

Characteristics of the Job

These stressors stem from specific job duties that the teacher performs, and from the role of teachers in the school milieu. Many job-related stressors have been identified in the past by researchers in the area. These include the following:

- role conflict
- role ambiguity
- role overload
- role underload
- role insufficiency
- responsibility for people
- repetitiveness
- autonomy
- feedback

Role conflict is one of the most common sources of stress. Role conflict occurs when the teacher receives conflicting demands from people about what he/she is supposed to do. Thus, the school principal may expect teachers to do one thing; parents of the students may expect another. Sometimes, the same person holds incompatible expectations of the teacher. For instance, school administrators often expect teachers to run their classes quietly; they often also want teachers to encourage the active

participation of students. Unable to resolve the inconsistencies among the various demands, the teacher feels in a bind. Thus, role conflict can be a potent source of stress.

Another potential stressor is *role ambiguity*, which occurs when an individual is unclear about what is expected of him/her on the job. In the study conducted by the author, for instance, many teachers said they did not know what to expect in their jobs from one day to the next. These feelings were directly responsible for much of the stress experienced by the teachers. If one does not know what one is supposed to do one the job, if one does not know why one is supposed to do something, and if one does not know the criteria by which one will be judged, role ambiguity is likely to be high, and a teacher prone to the experience of stress.

Role overload is another job-related stressor. Role overload refers to having too much work to do in the time available, or having work that it too difficult for the skills and abilties a teacher has. Role overload was one of the most severe stressors for the teachers in our study. Many teachers had several preparations each day; some teachers noted that they never had time to sit down from the time they came in in the morning to the late afternoon, because all their classes ran back-to-back. At least three things can happen when a person has too much work to do: he/she can complete all the work, but do a mediocre job; he/she can complete part of the work, leaving other parts undone; or he/she can work round-the-clock, and be a nervous wreck. The teachers in our study appeared to opt for the last alternative most often. But using this strategy over extended periods of time can be very detrimental, not only to the teacher's physical and mental health, but to the effective functioning of the school as well.

Another type of role overload occurs when teachers simply do not have the skills and experience to perform their jobs adequately. This form of role overload was salient in the work lives of many teachers in our study. Most teachers remarked that although they had acquired specific content skills through their education, they felt they did not have the classroom 'management' skills they needed. Only with experience were these teachers able to learn how to handle themselves and their students in class. The teachers who were new to teaching were, in fact, still overwhelmed by the enormity of their jobs.

Somewhat related to role overload is the concept of *role insufficiency*, which occurs when teachers have inadequate materials, information, equipment, etc., to do their jobs properly. For instance, some teachers in our study complained that they did not have enough desks in the classroom to seat all students; another teacher's American History book was written in 1959. The presence of necessary resources can ease a teacher's work life considerably.

Role underload occurs when the teacher has skills and abilities that were acquired through experience (or in school) that are not being used on the job. Many teachers in our study were teaching subjects that had little or nothing to do with the fields of their specialization. It is stressful to feel that one's education has been wasted, and that one's job is irrelevant to one's skills and training.

The extent to which a job entials *responsibility for other people* has also been found to be stressful. A teacher's job usually involves a great deal of responsibility for students--teachers can shape the socio-emotional, as well as the intellectual, growth of their students. To the extent that teachers view their jobs as including responsibility for all aspects of the

students' growth, therefore, they are likely to feel stressed.

A *repetitive* job is often stressful. Having to do the same thing over and over again, without any breaks or changes, can put enormous pressure on a person. A report of work in America noted that many workers in machine-paced jobs drank during lunch. When asked about the reasons for their drinking, the workers replied that that was the only way to cope with the overwhelming boredom of their jobs. To some extent, a teacher's job is also boring. One teacher in our study noted, for instance, that he taught the same thing over and over again, five times a day. According to the teacher, the job had made him incredibly bored, and he would move into another job as soon as the opportunity arose.

Autonomy, or decision-making authority on the job, has also been linked to stress in different ways. The burden of decision-making can occasionally be stressful. On the other hand, decision-making authority can minimize the adverse effects of other stresses. For instance, if the teacher has autonomy, she/he can resolve the conflicts or ambiguities inherent in the job. Thus, job-related autonomy can serve to increase or decrease the amount of stress a teacher experiences.

Relationships with Others

Relationships with others constitute the second group of organizational stressors. Three sets of "others" are relevant in this context:

- school administrators
- colleagues
- students

The school principal and the other *school administrators* are critical in determining whether the work lives of teachers are stressful or not. In our study, the school principal emerged as one of the most critical

influences on whether or not teachers experienced stress. Characteristics of supervisors and principals that are associated with stress include: making unilateral decisions; delegating the work to subordinates, but not the authority to do the work properly; caring only about the performance of subordinates and not their socio-emotional needs; being overly critical; and not going 'to bat' for subordinates.

Colleagues (i.e., other teachers) can also affect the degree of stress that teachers experience. In our study, many teachers noted that one of the most effective ways for them to handle their work-related stress was to talk to other teachers--since the other teachers had had similar experiences, they 'understood.' Just having an empathic ear to listen to one's problems was enough to relieve the stress that some teachers felt. Teachers can also be sources of stress. One teacher in our study had severe problems with her work life because the other teachers had, in effect, ostracized her, and she felt isolated and lonely. In short, she was under stress.

Students are also potential stressors. To the extent that students are obedient, respectful, and academically-inclined, teachers were less likely to experience job-related pressures. The issue of discipline is also relevant here. Many teachers in our study felt that discipline problems were handled inconsistently in their schools, and that this inconsistency undermined their authority with students. Discipline problems and the ways in which they are handled by the administration, are among the most powerful stressors.

General Properties of the School

This is the last group of organizational stressors, and probably the least potent as a cause of stress. Although some research has indicated that school characteristics (such as school size) can affect the work

experiences of teachers, these stressors were not very strong in our study.

Summary

Many aspects of the work environment can lead to feelings of stress among teachers. The job, other teachers, discipline issues, characteristics of the school administration, can all be potential stressors for teachers. The greater the number of stressors present in the school, and the greater the intensity of these stressors, of course, the greater the stress that teachers are likely to experience. Furthermore, the persistence of these stressors over extended periods of time is likely to increase the negative effects of stress.

What Administrators Can Do To Reduce Teacher Stress

Work stress among teachers is not a problem just for teachers. On the contrary, school administrators must be concerned with the phenomenon, not only for humanitarian reasons, but for progmatic reasons as well. Role stress affects a teacher's physical and mental health; it may also lead to dysfunctional behaviors among teachers--behaviors such as reduced efficiency, tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover.

These dysfunctional behaviors are costly for the school. Many substitute teachers must be paid, for example, to make up for those teachers who are absent. Likewise, turnover is expensive. Some people estimate that an organization loses the equivalent of 2½ months' pay for every employee who turns over--and this figure applies only to lower level employees in semi-skilled jobs! For jobs that require more training and experience, the losses are considerably greater. Because many turnover costs are hidded (e.g., personnel time in processing forms, loss in terms of efficiency, etc.),

however, they are easy to overlook. But, in the long run, the costs of these dysfunctional behaviors can add up, and they can be debilitating for the organization's economy.

Not only are tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover expensive, they are disruptive to the smooth functioning of the school as well. A class that is frequently taught by substitute teachers, for instance, is likely to be less conducive to learning than one that is usually taught by regular teachers. Likewise, the overall climate of the school may suffer considerably if teachers come to work late, or if the roster of available teachers is always changing.

To the extent that work-related stress increases the likelihood that teachers will manifest these behaviors, it is in the interests of school administrators to attempt to ameliorate such stress. Furthermore, to the extent that the stress stems from properties of the school, it is in the *power* of school administrators to attempt to ameliorate the stress. Given the various precursors and their relative potency in our study, many suggestions can be derived about the ways school administrators can begin reducing teacher stress.

- There are many school properties that are beyond the administrators' power to change and control. For instance, the school administrator has relatively less direct influence on federal regulations regarding educational priorities than he/she does over the day-to-day functioning of the school. Focusing on those causes of teacher stress that are under their direct control minimizes the diffusion of administrators' energies and maximizes the focusing of concerted effort on those stressors that are most susceptible to change.

- Many of the teachers' complaints centered on their teaching assignments--they were assigned to teach subjects with which they had little familiarity. A good matching of backgrounds and assignments can probably be achieved with relative ease, and would be instrumental in relieving teacher stress.

- With respect to their work loads, different teachers in our study mentioned different problems. Within the same school, for instance, some teachers had five classes of the same subject (one preparation), while others had five totally different preparations. A more equitable distribution of work loads is probably conducive to stress reduction.

- Many teachers felt that they received conflicting demands from the school administrators. Thinking about the implications of each demand made on teachers would probably reduce some inconsistencies. Furthermore, some teachers remarked that different administrators made demands on them that were conflicting. Greater coordination *among administrators* about the demands relayed to teachers would probably relieve this problem.

- Teachers in our study felt that their jobs were ambiguous. If administrators worked with these teachers to clarify their job requirements, or assigned more experienced teachers to work with the newer teachers in clarifying their jobs, role clarity could probably be heightened, and another potential stressor removed from the work environment.

- A strong stressor in our study was qualitative role overload. Teachers reported that they had not learned classroom management skills in school, and many remarked that they had not acquired such basic skills as test construction, grading, etc. Needless to say, all these are essential to the smooth functioning of a class. Making in-service programs available to teachers so they can formally acquire these skills would be quite beneficial to the teacher and to the school as well.

- Since the more experienced teachers are the ones able to handle stressful classroom situations better, it may be beneficial to make class assignments in a way that minimizes the placement of 'new' teachers in stressful classes, and maximizes on the experience of the 'older' teachers in handling these classes.

- Many teachers were concerned because they felt they could not count on the support and the backing of the school administration. A uniformly compliant posture on the part of the school administration is probably as detrimental to to school morale as is a uniformly belligerent posture. At the same time, however, it is useful to foster the perception that school administrators are teachers' friends, and people to whom a teacher can turn when he/she feels the need to.

- Many teachers reported that discipline problems were handled inconsistently by their school administrators, and that this

undermined the teacher's authority with the students. A concerted effort by school administrators to mete out justice equally and fairly would be instrumental in alleviating this source of teacher stress.

- Teachers reported lower levels of stress when they perceived their jobs to have high levels of variety and low levels of repetitiveness and monotony. Thus, if classroom assignments are made in ways that some variety is assured, the degree to stress that teachers experience will be minimized. Of course, the earlier point of not having too many preparations should also be remembered here. The ideal would be for teachers to have some variations in their assignments, without being completely snowed under with preparations.

- Many teachers reported that they did not have the resources they needed to do their jobs effectively and effeciently. Principals and other administrators have control over the distribution of *some* resources. Beyond that, however, they are in the position to "lobby" school districts for the allocation of more resources for their schools. A major step toward relieving teacher step could be achieved if the resources necessary to teach well were available to teachers.

- In many ways, principals and other administrators may be able to 'buffer' teachers against the harmful effects of stress. They can provide a sympathetic shoulder to cry on, lend an understanding ear for airing problems, and generally 'be there' when teachers need the.

These are some ways indicated by our study for administrators to help in reducing teacher stress. Two additional points are relevant here. First, stress is a subjective experience. It is based on how teachers *perceive* their work environments. Therefore, it is necessary to change, not only the objective environment, but the teachers' *perceptions* of the objective environment as well, if stress is to be relieved. In many cases, the objective reality may not be stressful; misperceiving their environment, however, the teachers may feel stressed anyway. Perceptions and attitudes are often harder to change than is the outside world. But perceptions are the immediate precursors of stress, and it is these perceptions that must be the focus of most change efforts.

Second, it is obviously impossible for any school administrator to

implement *all* the suggestions listed above immediately and simulteneously. If teachers feel that the school administration is *trying* to relieve their burden, and if administrators work on reducing the stressors one at a time, however, a giant step toward rescuing teachers from intense stress will have been achieved.

Conclusions

Understanding the dynamics of teacher stress can be useful for school administrators in many ways. It provides them with a better understanding of their own and teachers' work lives; it can make them better supervisors and colleagues for teachers; it can also improve the effectiveness of the school. If administrators know what causes teacher stress, they can take action steps to reduce the stress--at the very least, they can understand why teachers react to the school environment in the ways that they do. If each school administrator identifies those aspects of his/her managerial style and school environment that are most likely to be stress-producing for teachers, and tries to alter these phenomena in ways that stimulate stress-reduction for teachers, then the school can, indeed, become a more pleasant place to work. Not only would a healthier and happier work force of teachers result in such circumstances, but also a more effective group of teachers. The school, teachers, students, and society as a whole can all be beneficiaries from the reduction (but not the total elimination) of stress from thw work place.